

# Seek the Trace of The Classic of Mountains and Seas



P 1

Hello, dear colleagues, classmates, and friends online. I'm Wang Chuan, a professor at Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, China, and also an art creator. Today, I'm really honored to be invited by the Confucius Institute at the Open University of the UK to share with you an art project that I've been working on over the past four years.

From 2024 to 2025, with the 3A game "Black Myth: Wukong", the fantasy blockbusters "Fengshen Part 1 and 2", "Ne Zha 2", and "Chang'an: A New World" successively meeting with



players and audiences worldwide, traditional Chinese culture seems to have finally broken away from the simple stereotypes composed of fixed symbols such as Chinese cuisine, martial arts, lion dance, and Chinese knot. Although this state has come rather late, I'm still excited about it. It should be like this.

The above situation has inadvertently brought more inspiration and injected new vitality into the subsequent extension of my following art project, and also provided a perfect prelude for our sharing today.

My art project revolves around the "Shan Hai Jing", which is known as the "ancient mysterious book" in China. This ancient Chinese cultural encyclopedia, the most important and unique of its kind, has fascinated countless people. The more deeply I study it, the more I can feel the breadth and depth of the fields it involves, covers, and nourishes.





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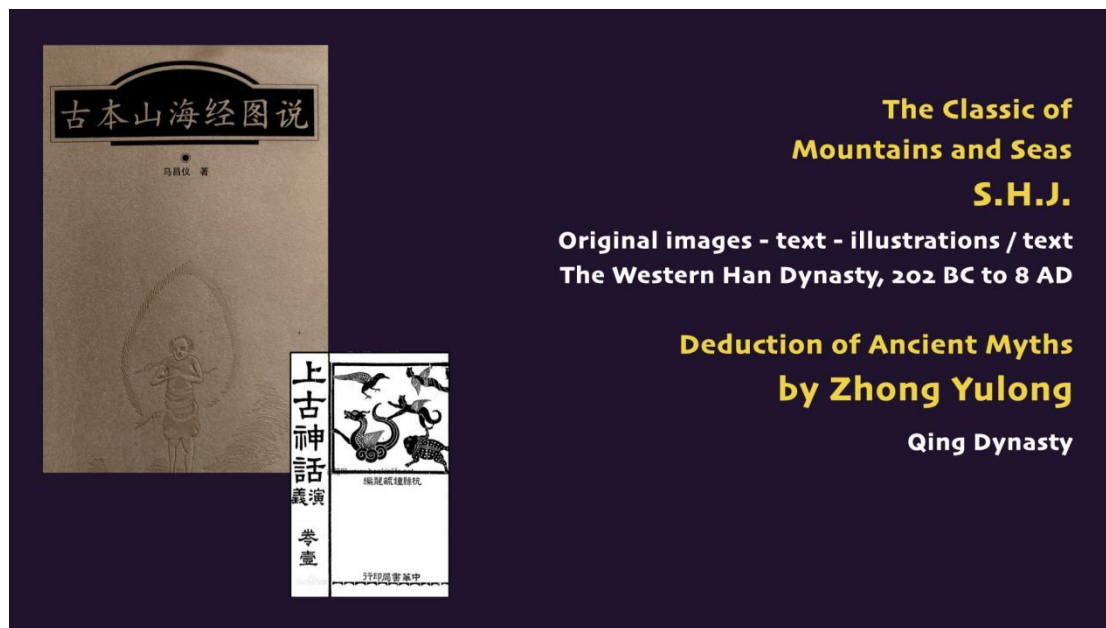
Eventually, I named the creation that started in 2020 the "Comprehensive Art Project of the 'Shan Hai Jing'". The reason is that in terms of the results so far, it is totally open-ended and hard to categorize.

I have to admit that for this art project, the sudden COVID pandemic in 2020 played a decisive role. Memories of that time are now becoming blurred, and sometimes it seems as if those events hadn't happened. However, the works in front of me always tell me with absolute certainty that it was an extremely real experience. Today, I am willing to regard this experience as a gift. The Chinese saying goes, "Heaven rewards the diligent." When this gift quietly appears, you must,



as Anish Kapoor said, instantly recognize its weight and significance, and then hold on to it.

<http://global.cafa.edu.cn/research/all/4>



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In this sharing, the "Shan Hai Jing" will appear in the form of the Chinese PINYIN abbreviation S.H.J.

The basic information about the "Shan Hai Jing" can be easily searched and consulted, so I won't elaborate on it here. As an art creator, I naturally pay more attention to certain information in it. For example, in the process of its compilation, the order of "images first and then texts". According to legend, Yu the Great, who controlled the floods in ancient China, after successfully dredging the floods and demarcating the national



territory, that is, what the Chinese call the "Nine Provinces", ordered his minister Bo Yi to carve many of the images he had seen and encountered on a series of bronze tripods, which served as a survival guide for the people. This is the original "Map of Mountains and Seas". Although this is just one version among many archaeological interpretations so far, I personally think it conforms to the law of human cognitive development. I believe that in the years after the floods were initially controlled, identifying things by images had become an effective means for the ancients to understand the world, spread knowledge, and inherit experience. At that time, familiarity with and correct response to these images were all related to life and death. Such image production should be regarded as a national governance behavior, and the pursuit of art or aesthetics is undoubtedly subordinate.

The "Shan Hai Jing" in its true sense was continuously revised and supplemented by later generations over a long period of time, and was finally completed by Liu Xin of the Western Han Dynasty. In the Qing Dynasty, the collation of this book reached its peak.

For history, the imagination of later generations never stops. Another book that has important reference value for my



creation is "The Deduction of Ancient Myths". Its author, Mr. Zhong Yulong, weaved a large amount of content from the "Shan Hai Jing" together with the earliest Chinese myths and legends in modern vernacular Chinese. This book makes the "Shan Hai Jing", whose texts are obscure and difficult to understand, become specific, rich, and full of imaginative vitality. At the same time, it also creates narrative connections among the scattered and miscellaneous mythological stories.



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The illustrations in the existing publications of the "Shan Hai Jing" include the "Map of Mountains and Seas" from the Ming and Qing dynasties, as well as stone carvings, lacquer paintings, and paintings by famous artists of various dynasties.



In my opinion, these simple, rustic, and strange images are rich enough as a reference system.

The "Shan Hai Jing" has complex attributes. It records the mountains, rivers, and products within and outside the scope of activities of the ancient Chinese. Regarding the accurate reference of this scope, there are still various speculations and interpretations. At the same time, it records countless rare birds, strange beasts with unique shapes, their various omens and magical powers, as well as related mythological legends and sacrificial customs. All these vaguely outline the imagination, cognition, and aesthetic taste of the ancient Chinese towards the world, nature, and life. In 2020, the records in this book about "great floods", "raging fires", "large-scale wars", "major epidemics", and "great fears" naturally echo the global news hotspots. At this time, you will be astonished by the transcendence of these records across thousands of years. It seems to tell us that the circulation of yin and yang on this earth, the transformation from extreme adversity to prosperity, remain the same throughout the ages.



## ORIGINAL FIGURES

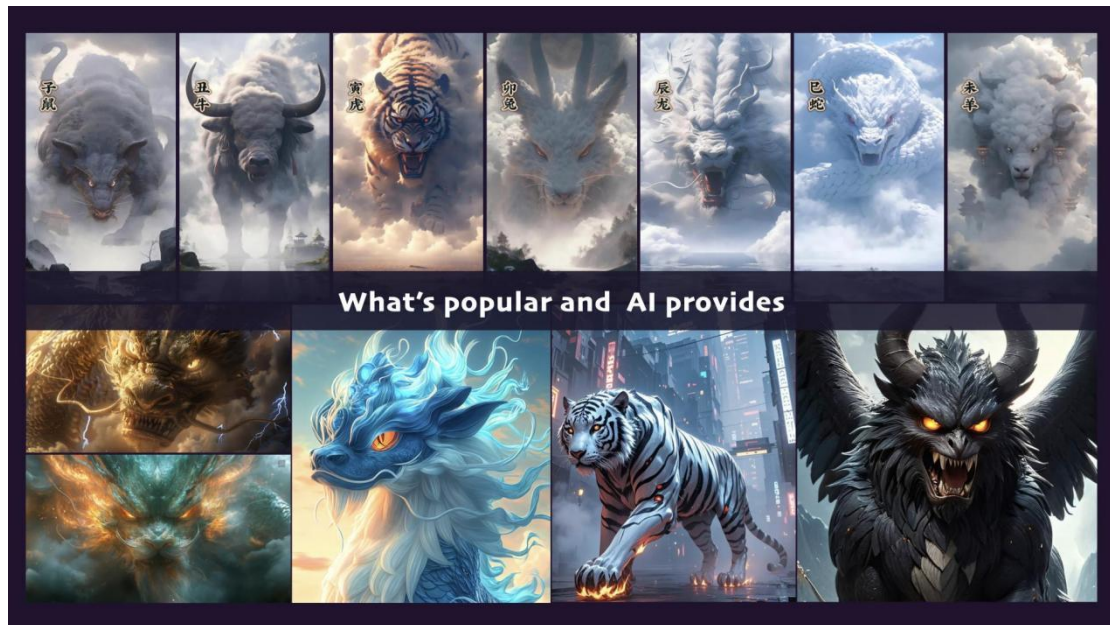
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The prototype is the starting point of all creation.

All the initial hazy ideas need to be visualized first in this stage and then determined. From the very beginning, I have established the principles of "originality" and "localization".

"Originality" is first manifested as a kind of "individuality", which means being vigilant against "repetition" - whether it is repeating others or oneself. This is probably a proposition that all art creations have to face. Secondly, I want to emphasize a Chinese style as I understand it. This idea has its own historical background.





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These images come from the tens of thousands of works submitted to an AI creation competition themed on the "Shan Hai Jing". The high degree of homogeneity and repetition presented by these works have become the first characteristic that no one, including the organizers, can deny. Another worrying fact is that the single visual feature from the field of film, television, and animation has become the overwhelming dominant visual style. Although when I set the above principles for myself five years ago, AI had not yet become popular, this situation has in fact become a phenomenon-level existence. Today, it has been extremely magnified in the world of AI.





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Obviously, this is not what I want. But what exactly I want is still unknown. The so-called "Chinese-style" also requires a large number of personalized interpretations to enrich it. To fulfill this idea, I need to do a lot of specific work. From the beginning, color has been regarded as an important visual element. Regarding color, different from the aesthetic system formed by Western scientific analysis of light, the Chinese pay more attention to the fixed meanings of each color and the relationships constructed thereby. This requires the expression of each color itself, and for this reason, I will not hesitate to give up the rich textures provided by 3D software.





**what I want:**  
**individuality、indigenization、Contemporaneity**

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I need to constantly make choices and balance between "returning to the past" and "rooting in the present". I believe that "drawing nourishment" does not mean directly taking. It requires you to understand, digest, transform, and then create. And "returning to tradition" by no means means being isolated from the present. Therefore, I hope that these images will not only contain unique genes extracted from ancient Chinese sculptures, artifacts, and murals, but also have the basis of the skeletal and muscular structures of animals provided by natural science, as well as a character and identity that are compatible with today's common visual habits. All these are finally unified in the Chinese-style curves and color relationships. The Chinese have a persistent attachment to



curves. In my creative career, I have a very personal feeling about this. Perhaps it is because of the intuitive beauty and gentle power contained in them.



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The guardian deity of Kunlun Mountain recorded in the "Shan Hai Jing", the Kaiming Beast, is a huge tiger with nine human faces. For the human face part, I referred to the images of the warriors in the Terracotta Army of Emperor Qin Shi Huang - the most powerful soldiers in Chinese history, and combined it with the facial makeup of Chinese Peking Opera. And its posture is that of the most dazzling tiger king that we can see today. It looks down on the world below with an imposing manner, where is the human world, our world.





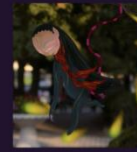


## STRUCTURE VISUAL & IMPLICIT

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Among more than 200 deities and mythical beasts, I try to choose those with metaphorical omens, or those with strange shapes and accompanying legends for creation, and give up those that directly correspond to existing species or appear repeatedly. Along with the creation of the images is endowing them with characters and setting their behaviors. This itself is highly ritualistic, a ritual of invitation and summoning. At the same time, the subsequent works set "past" and "present" scenes for their appearance, as well as static and interactive states. And the extensive use of texts determines that reading is also indispensable when viewing these works.





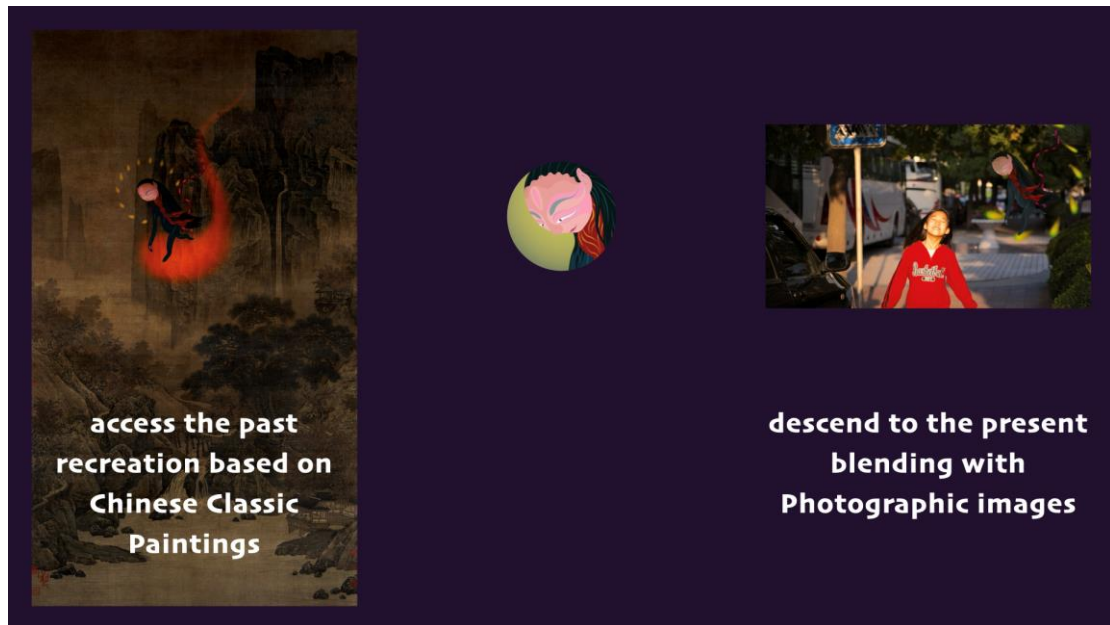
## TIME LINE

mythical creatures from **S.H.J.** have never left,  
the ancient wisdom they carry is always with us.

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The timeline, as a basic structure, has the past and the present at its two ends. Correspondingly, it is either the encounter between the prototype characters and the famous ancient Chinese paintings or regarding the real scenes condensed in the photographic images as the stage. "It has been there, and it has come again!" Yes, they have never left and are always with us.

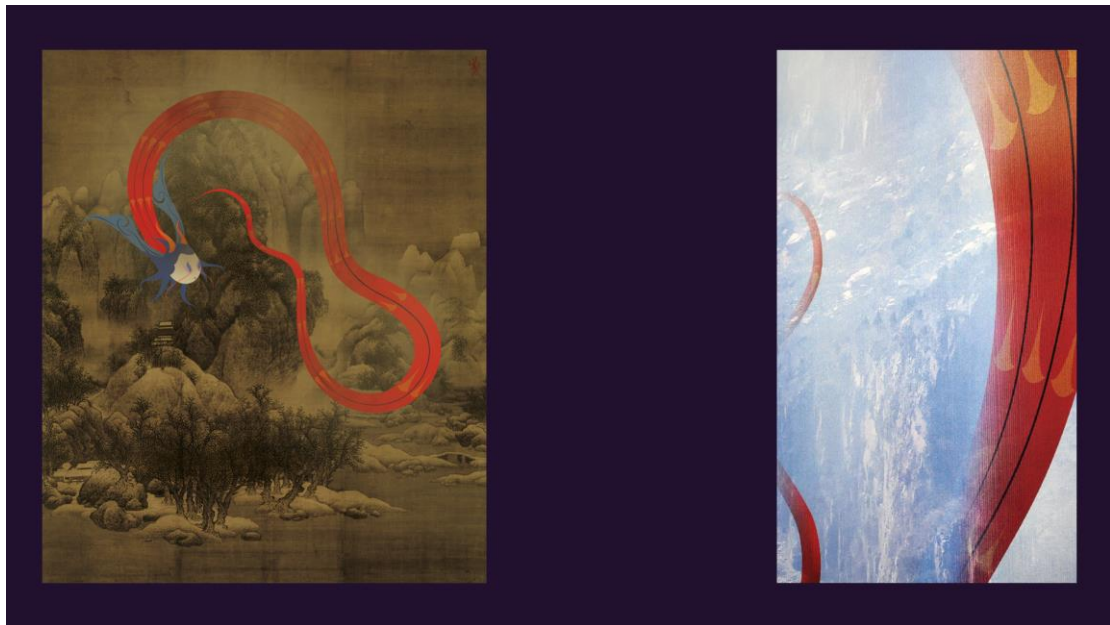




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Art creation itself is a process in which thinking is constantly revised and formed. In this process, I increasingly realize and am willing to believe that the strange beasts from the "Shan Hai Jing" have never left, and the ancient wisdom is with us. Those things we call myths and legends, if they no longer have vitality, it means they will stay at a certain time coordinate and become history. Otherwise, we will definitely have the opportunity to encounter them again in reality and feel their significance of existence once more. Today, the reconstruction of mythological paintings, as a continuation of collective memory, is showing us its strong vitality. Every time we turn our eyes to them, they are no longer only belonging to the past.





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The visual structure comes from the materials. In the sequence of reality, the integration of the prototype and the photographic image is finally combined with an ancient material called lenticular printing. The intervention of this material makes the audience only able to see the incomplete image of the prototype 99% of the time, and sometimes there is nothing at all. The complete image will only be obtained through its own stillness within a very small angular range. This state of being partially visible and partially invisible is what these characters should be like. The result of the intervention of this material is the emergence of physical interaction. The way of viewing has also changed from gazing



to searching. And what to see, to what extent, and when to stop, all these are left to the audience. But there is a premise: you need to be on-site to face the work. (Single-lens devices such as cameras or mobile phones cannot record the visual results based on binocular viewing.)



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In November 2024, the solo exhibition titled "Return to the Mountains and Seas" was held at the Hubei Art Museum. In order to maintain a reasonable and appropriate density, one-third of all the works were exhibited in the exhibition. The planning of the entire exhibition hall actively corresponds to the structure of the whole work in terms of regional division, illumination control, and the flow line. This exhibition covering



an area of more than 900 square meters received more than 60,000 visitors within 24 days, and the vast majority of them were young people. In China, the attention of the younger generation to traditional Chinese culture is a very remarkable cultural phenomenon in recent years. Therefore, I regret that I did not have more time to observe their behaviors and listen to their reactions. I really want to know what kind of reactions they will have to such works, which will be the most interesting and meaningful part.

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## **NARRATIVE THE VISUAL SCRIPTS**


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During the exhibition, an art critic described my creation as a




"visual script". This has brought me a new perspective to examine myself. I think to a large extent, I am indeed doing such a thing. Because each picture has indeed gone through the work of theme conception, script compilation, plot direction, character matching, and scene scheduling. The purpose is to jointly construct a certain context and relationship through images and texts, and thus unfold my personal narrative. Next, I will show this interesting process through several works.

## BO THE HORSE-LIKE CREATURE



a story about  
the war - ending,  
horse - like creature who  
eats tigers and leopards .

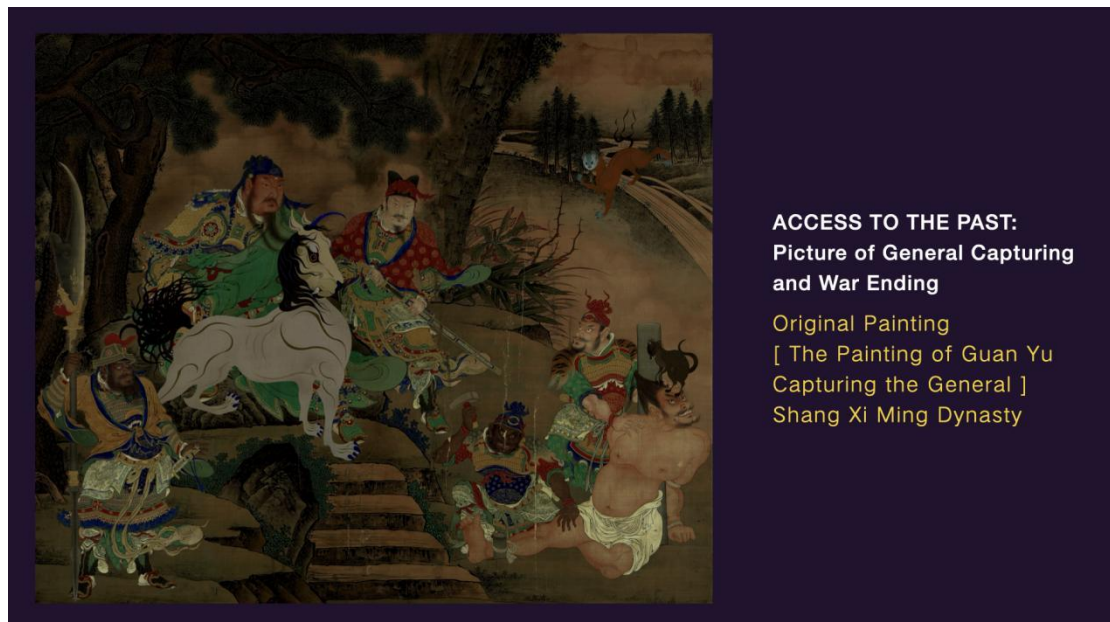


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There is a mythical beast that looks like a white horse, with a black mane and tail. But it also has the teeth and claws of a tiger, and it can make a roar like the beating of war drums.



Tigers and leopards and other beasts are all in its diet. Its ability is to stop wars. I think only such a powerful creature can shoulder this important task. The world we live in has never been truly peaceful, so peace has always been a vision. Perhaps for this reason, we have always needed the existence and appearance of this kind of beast.



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I brought this beast into the work "Guan Yu Capturing the Enemy General" by the famous Ming Dynasty painter Shang Xi. Guan Yu is a deified military general well-known to all Chinese people. He represents many virtues such as courage and loyalty. In the work, the scene of Guan Yu capturing the enemy general is one of the peak moments in his life. The focus of



such works is mostly on showing the might and valor of Guan Yu, but they mostly selectively ignore his defeat following this victory. For this reason, I first invited two evil little beasts - Liangqu, which looks like a feline, and Juru, which looks like a mouse. I think at that moment, General Guan's fate was definitely not taken care of by this beast. Perhaps these two little beasts were indeed involved. If this beast had appeared, the war might have been stopped, and the fate of the characters would have been rewritten. I know that history has no assumptions, but the reflection based on history has never stopped.

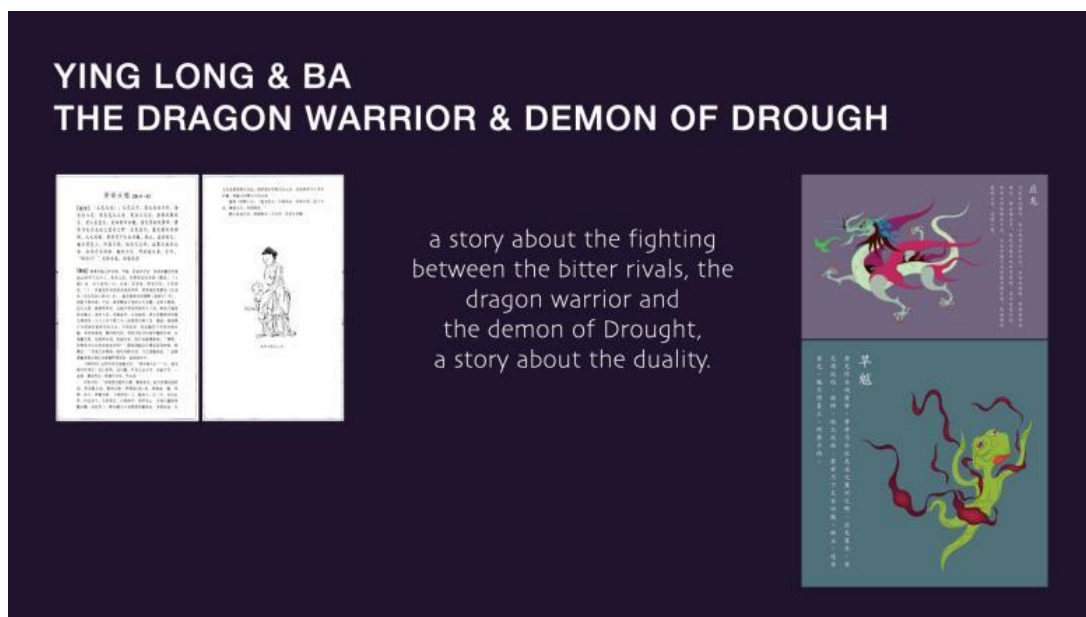


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Back to reality, this time it is based in Datong, an ancient city



that was once an important town on the northern border of China. In the setting sun, it is relaxed and gratified. Because since 75 years ago, this ancient defensive building, the city wall, has never been used in war again. Today, the interior of the city wall has been transformed into an exhibition space, and even the large-scale installations and sculptures in contemporary art can come and go freely. In the distance, there are people taking a leisurely walk. Even if they approach, they may not be able to see this ancient mythical beast. It doesn't matter, as long as it is there.



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The story of the Yellow Emperor's battle against Chi You is recorded in the "Shan Hai Jing", "The Deduction of Ancient



Myths", and many other ancient books. There are two characters in it who are sworn enemies. One is Ba, who can cause great droughts in the world. It is said that she is small in stature and green all over, with her eyes on top of her head. She moves like the wind, and wherever she goes, the land is parched and there is no water at all. And the one who can subdue her is Yinglong, a white battle dragon. Ba was invited by the Yellow Emperor to use drought to counter the Master of Wind and the Master of Rain on Chi You's side to defeat Chi You. She succeeded. But after the matter was accomplished, Ba refused to return to the heavens and stayed on earth, resulting in continuous droughts in the world. The Yellow Emperor had to try every means to balance Ba. Until the time of Yu the Great's flood control, Ba still brought droughts to the world, so Yu the Great invited Yinglong to use water to stop the drought. The philosophy in this story is very familiar to us, but it still needs to be repeatedly reminded, because there are always people who will ignore the two-sided nature of things.





ACCESS TO THE PAST:  
BA Hunting in the Heavenly Abode  
Original Painting  
[ Fairies in the Heavenly Abode ]  
Ruan Gao Southern Tang Dynasty

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In the 10th century, the powerful Tang Dynasty disintegrated, and China entered another period of great division - the period of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms. It is manifested by frequent regime changes and continuous wars. But such an era is often a prosperous period for the development of art. The magnificent Chinese landscape paintings that followed began to take shape during this period. Ruan Gao, an official in charge of the sacrificial affairs of the imperial ancestral temple in the Southern Tang Dynasty, one of the Five Dynasties in the south, was a renowned painter. His work "The Immortals in the Jade Garden" inherits the traditions of the Tang Dynasty and tells the story of E Lv, the maid of the Queen Mother of the West, and Dong Shuang



becoming immortals. The fairyland of the Yaochi in the painting is a sacred place in the hearts of countless Chinese people. The fairies riding dragons inject a sense of movement into the peaceful picture. When facing this scene, I suddenly thought of that epic chase. Ba, who was on the run, must have been in a hurry and didn't care about many things. Their chase disrupted the human world and also startled the immortal world. The Chinese have long summed up the saying, "It's easy to invite the gods, but difficult to send them away." Once invited, the price has to be borne by the gods as well.

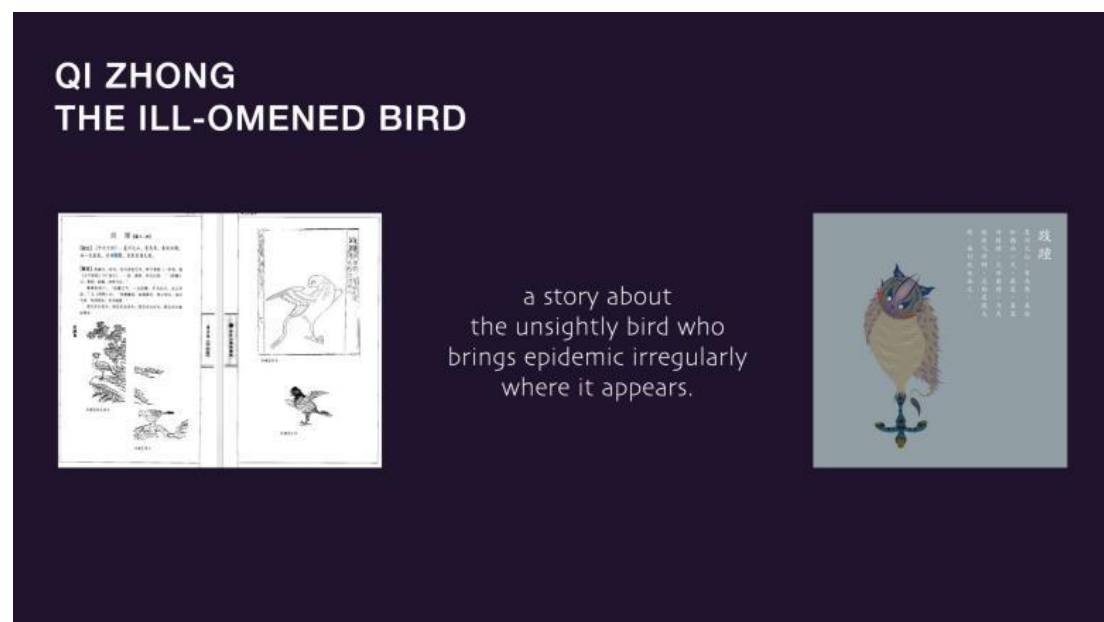


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In 2023, I visited the Baihetan Hydropower Station, one of the largest and most technically challenging hydropower projects



under construction in the world. This hydropower project spans the two provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan. Standing on the dam on the Ningnan side of Sichuan, even though only one drainage outlet was open, I was still shocked by the water flow like a dragon and the huge rumbling sound. At that time, the temperature exceeded 40 degrees, and I believed I had suffered from heatstroke. However, this did not prevent me from taking a photo for the appearance of Yinglong and Ba. It is said that Yinglong smashed all the water taken from the East China Sea towards Ba and washed her for a long time. Of course, this is what Mr. Zhong Yulong said.

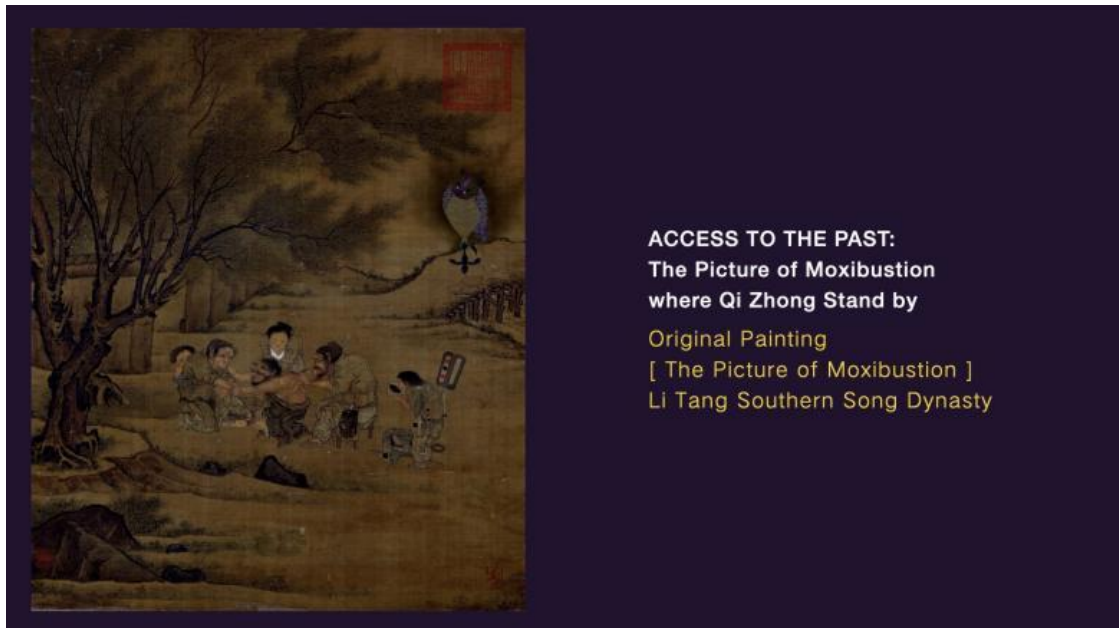


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The "Shan Hai Jing" records many animals that can bring



plagues. Qizhong, a strange bird with one leg, a pig's tail, and a look similar to an owl, is one of them. The Chinese believe that such evil and ominous creatures are mostly the products of the aggregation of negative energy between heaven and earth. They are the embodiment of "evil". There are many creatures like it in the book. Throughout human history, plagues have always accompanied us. In the extraordinary year of 2020, I naturally paid special attention to them.



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The Song Dynasty was a peak in traditional Chinese painting, and the most direct manifestation was the emergence of numerous masters and masterpieces. Li Tang, who was known as one of the "Four Great Masters of the Southern Song Dynasty" along with Liu Songnian, Ma Yuan, and Xia Gui, is a



representative of this period. He not only had magnificent landscape masterpieces like "Wind in the Ten Thousand Valleys and Pines", but also the famous work "Moxibustion Picture" which depicts the expressions of people vividly (of course, there is some controversy about this work). This is a typical scene at the entrance of an ancient Chinese village, with beautiful and tranquil scenery. However, in the center of the picture, a traveling doctor is treating the trauma of a farmer. There are his assistants and villagers who are watching and helping around. Today, in my work, there is an additional figure in the distance. There is a thick fog surrounding it. It stands on one leg and watches quietly, and the expression on its face seems to be mocking these people who don't understand the situation.





**DESCEND TO THE PRESENT: QI ZHONG**

The dilapidated greenhouse is in a sorry state, all the saplings dead,  
all occurred before I came.

Grating Lightbox 120 x 80 cm

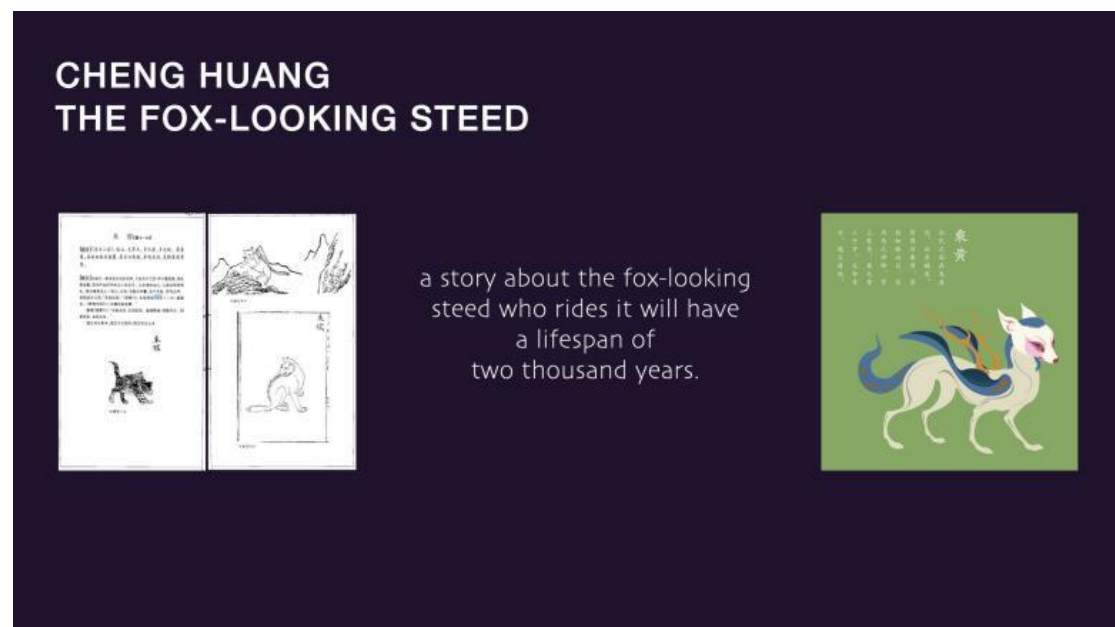
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During that period, I commuted between my home and the studio day after day. The road was empty, so I often got distracted and thought about the work in progress. Everything I saw seemed to be related to it. Outside the village where the studio is located, there were originally rows of greenhouses, and I couldn't name the plants inside. In a very short time, due to the lack of care and management, all the plants died, and the greenhouses quickly decayed. When I passed by here again on one occasion, there was clearly a Qizhong standing in front of me. But different from the Qizhong in Li Tang's painting, this time it seemed a bit aggrieved and helpless. It seemed to be saying that it couldn't be held responsible for this. When it came, it was already like this here. During that



time, on the Internet and in self-media, many people were reflecting on human behavior and were willing to interpret the disasters around the world as punishments from nature.

However, even so, I think Qizhong should still be held accountable, because its appearance itself may be a means of punishment.



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From food, clothing, housing, and transportation to seeking immortality and cultivating oneself, the yearning and persistence for longevity permeate all aspects of Chinese culture. Coincidentally, in the distant country of the White People, there grows a divine creature. It has the appearance of a fox but is tall in stature. In fact, it is a kind of horse and has



two horns on its back. It is said that those who ride it can live up to two thousand years old. In the eyes of the Chinese, it is an out-and-out auspicious beast.

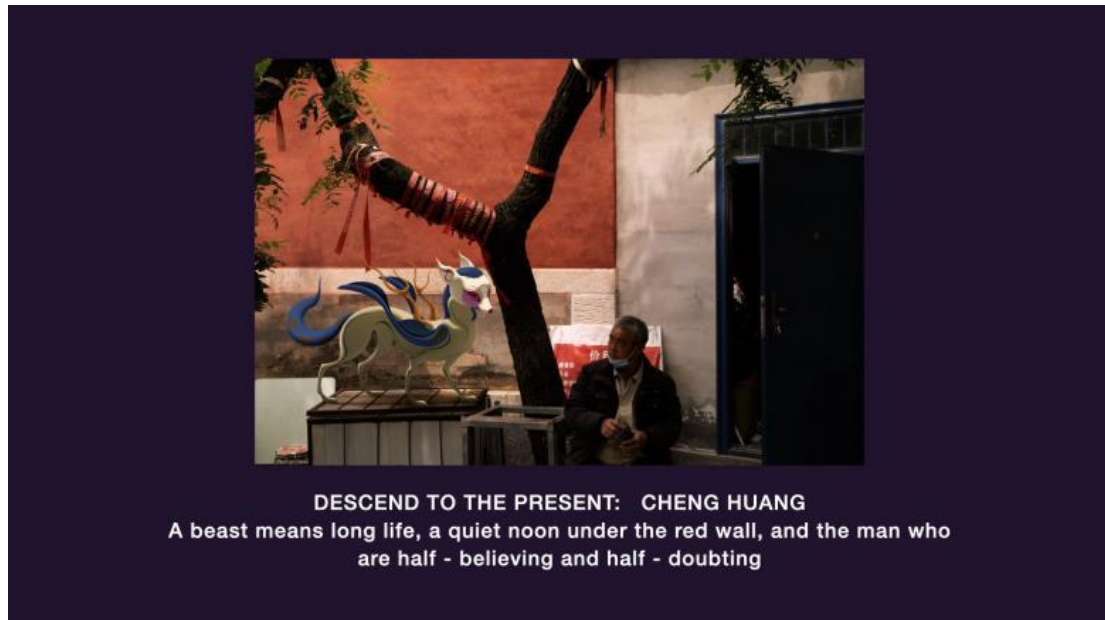


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In fact, the Ming Dynasty paintings I selected are much fewer than those of the Song Dynasty, but here it happens to be a work by Shang Xi. The "Picture of Four Immortals Paying Homage to the God of Longevity" depicts a scene where four accomplished immortals gather by the sea. When they look up, they suddenly see the Southern Pole Immortal, who represents ultimate longevity in Chinese mythology, flying by on a crane. So the four immortals step on the waves to greet him. In the relatively simple picture, we can see the fine



depiction of the three-legged toad, the iron crutch, the gourd, and the bamboo broom and banana leaves. Compared with these four immortals, Chenghuang is just a spiritual creature, and the path to becoming an immortal is still very long. For this reason, it must seize the opportunity to join in the fun and get a bit of the immortal aura, which may accelerate the process of cultivation. For good things, the Chinese always hope they can be even better, so they like to achieve perfection by adding more goodness to what is already good. I am no exception.



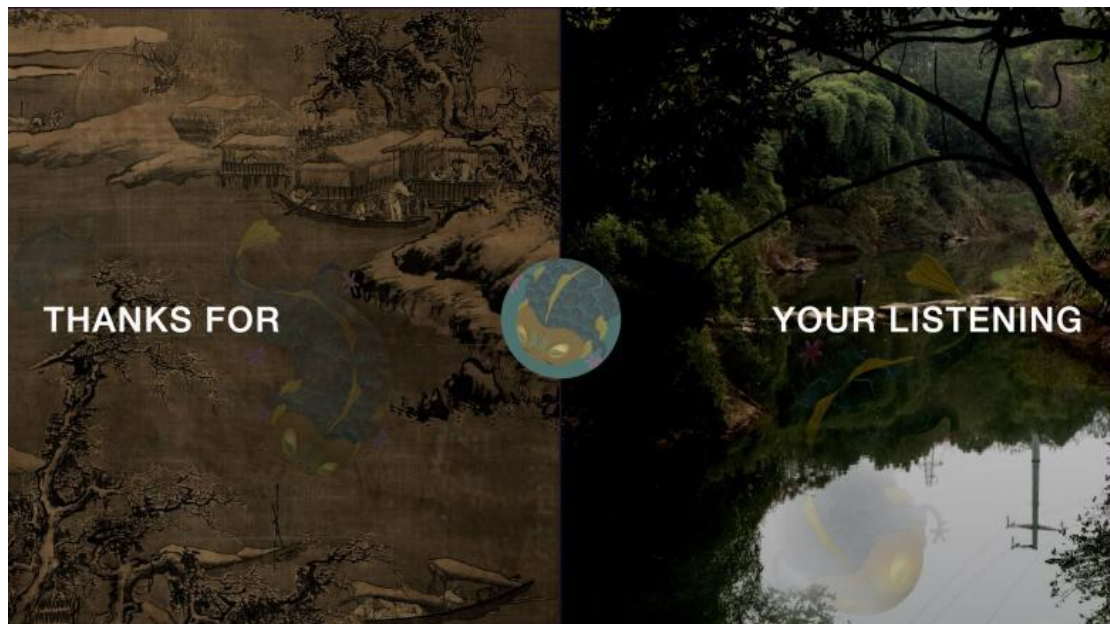
**DESCEND TO THE PRESENT: CHENG HUANG**  
A beast means long life, a quiet noon under the red wall, and the man who  
are half - believing and half - doubting

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However, today, longevity no longer makes the Chinese overly anxious. Compared with a number, more and more people



have shifted their focus to the quality of life, the process of life, and the current experience. In a leisurely afternoon, the quietly appearing spiritual beast is somewhat confused. The person in front of it is clearly no longer young, but there is no trace of excitement in his reaction to seeing it. There is even a bit of doubt in his gaze towards Chenghuang. I guess he might be thinking, should I believe you, or those pills taken morning and evening?



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Whether it is the text of the "Shan Hai Jing", the ancient illustrations, or the ancient paintings I borrowed, they are all like the shoulders of giants to me. They bring ideas and motivation to my art creation and also provide the most solid foundation. I particularly agree with what Jiaozi, the director of



"Ne Zha", said: "We just want the world to see that Chinese mythology contains the common emotions of all mankind." I think that in the early days of the creation of the world, no matter where humans settled and developed, what they faced was roughly the same, so their experiences and feelings also share the most commonalities. And mythology is the carrier and crystallization of this early wisdom, which still tells us who we are and what we used to be. In 2020, I clearly received a certain call, and I immediately responded and finally brought them back. Through this process, I initiated an open dialogue with history and tradition. Through my works, I have the opportunity to walk into history and touch the tradition together with more people. I think this may be the best way to express my reverence.

I would like to thank the Confucius Institute at the Open University of the UK for the invitation again. I also thank you all for your attention and patience. For me, it is an honor and an opportunity to share my understanding and perception of art and traditional Chinese culture. I have always believed that there is no more effective, inclusive, and boundary-crossing way of communication than art in this world. At the same time, I also think that art creation itself is a form of self-cultivation.



At the moment of facing the work, you are different from before. Thank you again !

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